

# The Post-revolutionary Hierocracy in Iran: Fundamentalism or Populism?

Author: Reza Chitsaz  
Semester: Fall 2015  
Course: RKT 140  
Level: Bachelor's Thesis  
Supervisor: Daniel Andersson

# Abstract

Few words are being used so frequently in the study of religion as the word fundamentalism. Even though the term was coined more than a century ago, it was with the establishment of the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran that it became part of common language. At the same time there are scholars who reject the term fundamentalism as an analytical tool regarding Iran. According to Ervand Abrahamian, *Third World Populism* is a more adequate term in describing the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran.

This paper seeks to examine the strengths and shortcomings of Abrahamian's criticism of fundamentalism relative the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran. This is done by an analysis of the relationship between religious fundamentalism and modernity. In so doing I conclude that it is possible and plausible to define fundamentalism in such a way that it can be applied to the theocracy in Iran.

*Key words: Post-revolutionary Iran, Fundamentalism, Khomeini, Modernity*

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Objective and questions.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Objective of this paper .....	5
<b>Limitations and method .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Method.....	5
<b>Theory .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Previous research on the subject.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>A brief historical background .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Material.....</b>	<b>12</b>
Fundamentalism as contested concept .....	12
Theological arguments against fundamentalism.....	13
<i>Fundamentalism; a brief history .....</i>	<i>14</i>
Khomeinism; a modern movement?.....	15
<i>Abrahamian's argument against khomeinism as pre-modern.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Khomeini's political theory and his break with Shi'ite tradition.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<b>Analysis .....</b>	<b>23</b>
Fundamentalism and modernity; a contradictory relation .....	23
Theocracy and the ideological state .....	25
<b>Final reflections .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Bibliography: .....</b>	<b>31</b>
Books.....	31
Articles: .....	32
Albums:.....	32

# Introduction

On Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> February 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, after 14 years of exile, returned to Iran from Neauphle-le-Château, a small village outside of Paris. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Iranian king, or *King of kings* as he preferred to be called had already fled the country. In less than two weeks, the end of the monarchy, one of the oldest in history, was official and a new era began in the modern history of Iran; the era of the post-revolutionary hierocracy. Shortly after the consolidation of the theocracy in Iran, the term religious fundamentalism found its way back in the academic writings on religion.

The Islamic revolution in Iran contradicted in a brutal way the secularization thesis on its very logical foundation and thereby gave rise to several serious questions. How could the anti-modernist clerics seize political power through a modern urban revolution in a modern nation like Iran? Was the explanation to be found in the nature of Islam or the Iranian society? What if the term fundamentalism was a misnomer altogether? How is the hierocracy in post-revolutionary Iran to be understood? Some scholars regard its consolidation as the starting point of the new fundamentalism. Others reject the term fundamentalism, due to its un-Islamic origin. Among scholars who dismiss the term is the historian Ervand Abrahamian who believes *Third World Populism*<sup>1</sup> is more adequate in describing the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran.

Abrahamian rejects fundamentalism, partly due to the term's origin, it being a description of the Protestant Movement in the 1920s in the US. The main argument against the term, however, is its incommensurability with modernity. In this paper I try to examine these arguments and with the help of scholars who define fundamentalism as a modern phenomenon, I try to move beyond the paradoxes that rise in relation to fundamentalism and modernity.

The first section briefly reviews the objective of this paper and the questions it seeks to answer followed by the method and theory used, and limitations explained. The next section reviews the previous research on the subject, with emphasis on Bruce Lawrence's book *The Defenders of God*<sup>2</sup>. Thereafter, follows some historic background on the subject and after that are discussed Abrahamian's arguments against the understanding of khomeinism as a pre-modern phenomenon, and his rejection of fundamentalism based on its incommensurability with modernity. This is followed by an analysis of the scholars who, in contrast to Abrahamian, put fundamentalism at the centre of modernity. Finally, the essay argues for fundamentalism as an analytical tool in describing the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran.

A note on non-English sources: unless otherwise stated, all translations to English are mine.

---

<sup>1</sup> Abrahamian defines Third World Populism as "a movement of the propertied middle class that mobilizes the lower classes, especially the urban poor, with radical rhetoric directed against imperialism, foreign capitalism, and the political establishment." Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 17

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence; B. B. (1989).

# Objective and questions

## Objective of this paper

The objective of this paper is thus to analyse fundamentalism relative to the Iranian revolution. In so doing I will review Abrahamian's main argument against fundamentalism as a scientific concept, and his argument in favour of populism in order to describe the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran. I will then contrast Abrahamian's argument with scholars who define the hierocracy in Iran as fundamentalist. Thus the questions this paper seeks to answer are the following:

1. Is khomeinism a pre-modern movement?
2. Is modernity and fundamentalism mutually exclusive?
3. Can fundamentalism and populism be combined?
4. Is fundamentalism as a concept an appropriate analytical tool in our understanding of the theocracy<sup>3</sup> in Iran?

## Limitations and method

It is important to point out what this paper will not do. Although I will discuss fundamentalism as an historical and political phenomenon, I will do so solely in relation to *khomeinism*. The hierocracy in Iran is unique in several respects. It is the first one, among religious-political movements to seize political power, and it did so through a popular urban revolution. The situation in Iran was in this respect radically different from the Taliban-movement in Afghanistan or today's ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Hence I will not discuss any other cases of Islamic radicalism. The reason is partially due to the limited space here but more importantly, due to the different origins of these movements.

Another limitation concerns fundamentalism as concept in the public space, the so-called *Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*. Although fundamentalism as a concept seems quite popular, especially in the mass media, I will only focus on the academic research in the area. While an interesting project, there is simply no space here to examine the way media uses the term.

## Method

The method used in this paper is literature studies, an analysis of different discourses regarding fundamentalism and its application to the Iranian case. I do this by reading representatives for different approaches towards the subject, notably literature on fundamentalism in general and on the Iranian revolution in particular. By comparing

---

<sup>3</sup> The term hierocracy is a more apt term in describing the post-revolutionary state in Iran, than theocracy since the clerics are the political rulers in Iran. Theocracy, which means Government of God, does not necessarily require the direct rule of the clerics. However throughout the text the terms hierocracy and theocracy will be used interchangeably.

these texts, hopefully, I will show why fundamentalism is a proper concept in describing the post-revolutionary hierarchy in Iran.

## Theory

In this paper I will follow Bruce Lawrence's comparative study on fundamentalism within the Abrahamic faiths, *Defenders of God*. I particularly find Lawrence's distinction between modernity and modernism useful. This distinction allows him to define fundamentalism as an anti-modernist phenomenon generated through modernity. Thus Lawrence is able to move beyond the apparent contradiction between fundamentalisms as a reactionary movement, with a pre-modern *Weltanschauung*, yet a product of modern society.

Bruce Lawrence defines fundamentalism, modernity and modernism as follows:

*Fundamentalism* is the affirmation of religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction; it is expressed through the collective demand that specific creedal and ethical dictates derived from scripture be publicly recognized and legally enforced.

*Modernity* is the emergence of a new index of human life shaped, above all, by increasing bureaucratization and rationalization as well as technical capacities and global exchange unthinkable in the premodern era.

*Modernism* is the search for individual autonomy driven by a set of socially encoded values emphasizing change over continuity; quantity over quality; efficient production, power, and profit over sympathy for traditional values or vocations, in both the public and private spheres.<sup>4</sup>

Fundamentalism in this perspective is an urban and active movement that while truly anti-modernist, it shares common ground with modernists. Fundamentalists and modernists are both universalists<sup>5</sup> and both have their own set of solutions to the anxiety caused by relativism. "Without modernity, there are no fundamentalists, just as there are no modernists."<sup>6</sup> This approach is particularly useful regarding the revolution in Iran, as a modern and urban revolution and resolves the contradictions that the Iranian revolution brought; namely that fundamentalism in fact succeeded in the most modernized country in the Middle East.

## Previous research on the subject

The rise of the clerics to political power in Iran was the starting gun for scientific research on fundamentalism that went beyond the generic case in the US in the 1920s. Bruce Lawrence's book is one of the earliest contributions on this subject. Lawrence argues that fundamentalism is an ideology generated by modernity and at the same

---

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence B. B. op. cit. p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> "Modernism/fundamentalism is best understood when viewed as a subset of a larger, longer battle between universalism and monadism [i. e. relativism]. Universalism claims all as ultimately one. Monadism sees all as provisionally many. [...] The fundamentalists, [...] declare themselves to be advocates of universalist norms. Their norms are not discoverable. They have been revealed once and for all. They are codified in holy writ. They require ascent not debate. They are understood by faith not by reason." Lawrence; B. B. op. cit. pp. 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> p. 2.

time it is in conflict with modernism. By following Marshal Berman's distinction between modernity and modernism, Lawrence is able to place fundamentalism at the centre of modernity, and hence free fundamentalism as a scientific concept from the straight jacket put on it by the historical circumstances surrounding the term.

Other pioneering research in the comparative sociology of religion that tries to define fundamentalism in such a way so that it can move beyond its entanglement in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is Martin Riesebrodt's seminal study, *Pious Passion*<sup>7</sup> first published in German 1990. In this book, fundamentalism becomes a sociological problem and is defined as "an urban movement directed primarily against the dissolution of personalistic, patriarchal notions of order and social relations and their replacement by depersonalized principles, [...] a qualitative change in virtually all social relations, interactions and institutions."<sup>8</sup>

*Pious Passion* is also interesting as one of the first books to compare Shi'ite and Protestant fundamentalism. Riesebrodt does that by criticizing a "perspective internalized by many since Max Weber's *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions*, [...] the drawing of historical comparisons from the point of view of the particular development of the West."<sup>9</sup> The criticism is due to the fact that in this perspective the West has become the 'normal' and the rest 'the exotic' case. As we will see this is one of the main reasons the term fundamentalism is discarded when it comes to non-Protestant religious movements. *Pious Passions*, on the contrary, treats all societies as equally 'normal' or 'exotic'.

Another contribution in the area is the ambitious and voluminous *The Fundamentalism Project*, which is the result of a decade of case studies and interdisciplinary research on the subject that resulted in five massive volumes. Here the authors try to make a general theoretical framework to grasp and compare fundamentalism within the large religions around the globe, and thus go beyond Bruce Lawrence's limited analysis within the Abrahamic religions. As Gabriel A. Almond et al explain in *Strong Religion*, which is a summarization of *The Fundamentalism Project*:

"The fundamentalists." Is it correct to generalize? *Strong religion* argues, in effect, that while Islam has produced a particularly virulent and potentially global form of radical fundamentalism, other major religious traditions have also given birth to movements that can be fruitfully compared with the Islamist movements (as well as to the original Christian case of the 1920s).<sup>10</sup>

Yet another book of importance, regarding the Iranian revolution is the sociologist Mansoor Moaddel's *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian revolution*<sup>11</sup>. Moaddel's book is important for several reasons. The books mentioned earlier try to theorize fundamentalism as a general theory regarding either fundamentalism in general, or within the Abrahamic faiths. Moaddel, on the other hand, focuses solely on the Iranian context, and especially the revolution that brought the clerics to power. He does so by analysing the role ideology and discourse played in the revolution.

---

<sup>7</sup> Riesebrodt; M. (1993).

<sup>8</sup> p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Almond; A. G. et al. (2003); p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Moaddel; M. (1993).

Thus the question for Moaddel is why none of the secular discourses, Marxism or secular Nationalism, were able to mobilize the mass protests against the monarchy, and instead it was “the Shi’i discursive field”<sup>12</sup> that managed to articulate the protests against the shah and led the revolutionary movement to its success.

In this paper I will use these earlier scholars to try to show that the post-revolutionary hierarchy in Iran indeed is fundamentalist. I will show that the Iranian case is unique in that it is the only one among fundamentalist movements to actually seize political power through a popular revolution<sup>13</sup> and thus end up in a radically new position, namely in power as opposed to opposition.

---

<sup>12</sup> Moaddel; M. (1993); pp. 154-163.

<sup>13</sup> Khomeinism is so far the only case when a radical religious movement seized political power through a popular revolution. The two other cases where Islamists have seized political power, notably the Taliban in Afghanistan and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant cannot be explained without the external factors. Taliban came to power as a direct consequence of USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan and the limitless support the Afghan Mujahedin received from the US. The Islamic State also rose as a Sunni revolt in reaction to Iraq’s occupation, the Iranian supported Shia-government in Iraq and the war in Libya and Syria. The pre-revolutionary monarchy in Iran, by contrast had no enemies on the international scene. For an excellent analysis of the Islamic State see Cockburn; P. (2015).



## A brief historical background

For a large part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among many scholars and social scientists, it was understood that the Western world was witnessing a constant withdrawal of religion from the public space, i. e. religious faith would become more and more individualized and a private matter. In so far that religion would exist, it would do so as “a historical artifact, part of cultures of long-gone, superstitious peoples.”<sup>14</sup> Seen in the prism of the secularization thesis this was what would happen as a consequence of urbanization and cultural pluralism, which itself was a consequence of modernization. The idea, following the classic sociologist Max Weber, was that secularization demystifies and disenchants the world.

Around the end of the 1960s, in an almost prophetic prediction about the future of religion in the world, Peter L. Berger, perhaps the leading proponent of the secularization thesis, could anticipate that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there will only be small isolated enclaves of religious people gathering together to avoid the surrounding secular world.<sup>15</sup> The secularization process was not only visible in Western Europe regarding Christianity, but also in countries with a Muslim majority with one major difference. In the ‘Islamic World’, “modernizing dictators”<sup>16</sup> introduced from above secularization and modernization.

If the Enlightenment in the West occurred as part of a more general democratization process, the phenomenon in the Muslim world in general, and Iran in particular, took the opposite direction. Religion and religiosity was seen as the main reason behind the country’s inferiority compared to the Western societies and the cure was the end of religion and traditions by brute force.

From the 1950’s after the UK-and US-initiated coup d’état, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi started his autocracy. During this period Iran was “the most modern country both on the socioeconomic and political level”<sup>17</sup> in the Middle East. The monarchy in the country was seen as a divine gift and according to the Empress Farah: “[It] has a special meaning for Iranian families. It is in our way-of-life. It has been an integral part of our history for 2500 years.”<sup>18</sup> She was by no means alone in her perception. Iran was generally characterized as “an island of peace and tranquillity in the stormy waters of world politics.”<sup>19</sup>

All of this would soon come to change. In a short period, 1977-1979, massive street demonstrations that would multiply into millions, together with worker’s strike brought down the monarchy in Iran.<sup>20,21</sup> The revolution 1979 was like earlier

---

<sup>14</sup> Emerson; O. M. & Hartman; D. (2006); p. 128.

<sup>15</sup> Sander; Å. & Andersson; D. (2015); p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Sachedina; A. A. (1991); p. 410.

<sup>17</sup> Losurdo; D. (2004); p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Farah Pahlavi quoted in Abrahamian; E. (1989); p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Moaddel; M. (2005); p. 240.

<sup>20</sup> “The Iranian Revolution was one of the most popular upheavals in world history: 10 percent or more of the Iranian population participated in the demonstrations and general strike that toppled Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. By comparison, less than 2 percent of the population participated in the French Revolution.” Kurzman; Ch. (2004); pp. vi-viii.

“The regime [i. e. the monarchy] was brought down by the largest protest demonstrations ever seen in

revolutions in history unexpected, or as some would say “unthinkable”<sup>22</sup>, yet the outcome of the revolution was even more perplexing.<sup>23</sup> Indeed “few considered the rise of theocracy in a modernized state a possibility, and even fewer thought it might result from a popular revolution.”<sup>24</sup>

The emergence of the hierocracy in Iran contradicted the secularization thesis in a brutal way, and for the first time in modern history, religion was not only an integral part of the organization of society, but in a totalitarian manner it embraced political power in a way that few theocracies from the Middle Ages even dared to dream of.

Some decades later when radical and violent interpretations of all major religions in every corner of the globe were a reality, Peter Berger explains that “secularization theory failed to anticipate something: that the demystification of the world provided within it the seeds both for the remystification of the world and resistance to the demystification.”<sup>25</sup> Berger who now had abandoned the secularization thesis argues in the opposite direction: “The religious impulse, has been a perennial feature of humanity (...) it would require something close to a mutation of the species to extinguish this impulse for good (...) the world today (...) is as furiously religious as it ever was.”<sup>26</sup>

Soon after the dust of revolution in Iran was settling and the real picture of the post-revolutionary hierocracy was getting clearer, the term fundamentalism found its ways back to the scholarly and medial description of Iran, and hence many social scientists and historians seem to agree that the revolution in Iran 1979 is the starting point for the emergence of the new fundamentalism.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, there seems to be an understanding of the theocracy in Iran, by virtue of it being Muslim and thus pre-modern, as more a natural ground for fundamentalism (here understood as fanaticism) to grow out of. This is perhaps most visible in a quote of Peter Berger, regarding his analysis of the Christian fundamentalists in the States: “The fanatical mullahs have been let loose in the land, *this* land.”<sup>28</sup> But not everyone seems to agree on this description of the hierocracy in Iran.

---

human history (over 2 million in one occasion in Tehran, millions more in other cities) and probably the most prolonged and successful general strike in world history as well.” Moaddel; M. (1993); p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> For a brief history of the events that eventually led to the culmination of the revolution in 1979 see Abrahamian, E. (1982); Chapter 11, (1989); pp. 29-41 & (2008); pp. 155-162, Arjomand; S. A. (1988); chapters 6-7 and Nedjati; Gh. R. (1991); vol. ii, pp.91-126.

<sup>22</sup> Kurzman; Ch. op. cit. p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> As one scholar summarized it, the Islamic revolution in Iran “has indeed a good claim to being the surprise of the century, a century not devoid of surprises.” Arjomand; S. A. op. cit. p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Emerson; M. O. & Hartman; D. op. cit. p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Berger quoted in Sander; Å. & Andersson; D. op. cit. p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> “Although there were earlier movements [such as the Jewish Gush Emunim (the Block of the Faithful) in 1974], the Iranian Revolution was the first unmistakable indicator of a growing phenomenon.” Emerson; M. O. & Hartman; D. op. cit. p.132. See also Almond; G. A. et al. (2003); p. 1, and Risebrodt; M. (1993); p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Berger quoted in Riesebrodt; M. op. cit. p. 2.

Ervand Abrahamian<sup>29</sup> is today one of the leading scholars of the modern political history of Iran. He has written quite extensively on the subject and his magnum opus *Iran Between two Revolutions*<sup>30</sup> is considered the standard text in the field. In a collection of essays called *Khomeinism*<sup>31</sup> he argues against the general identification of the state in Iran as fundamentalist, while he argues in favour of *Third World Populism* as a more adequate description of the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran. In this paper I will analyse Abrahamian's arguments and criticism of the description of the hierocracy in Iran as fundamentalist.

I will specifically examine his arguments regarding the relationship between fundamentalism and modernity and his view on fundamentalism as an historical concept and try to show that, although Abrahamian's arguments in some of his criticism of the way scholars in the West have identified the Islamic Republic in Iran seems justified, rejecting fundamentalism and replacing it with populism seems to lack argumentative support.

While Abrahamian is an important scholar in the field, his criticism alone would hardly qualify for an examination of the differences among scholars regarding the state in contemporary Iran. The fact is, already from the early days of the clergy's seizure of political power in Iran, there have existed a political discourse that underestimates the role religion plays as ideology in political power.

In this view the hierocracy in Iran has the potential to transform to a 'normal' state where "it contains the potential for change and acceptance of modernity- even eventually of political pluralism, gender equality, individual rights, and social democracy."<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Born in Iran as an Armenian-Iranian he was raised in England. He teaches at the City University of New York (CUNY) where he is Distinguished Professor of History at Baruch College.

<sup>30</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1982).

<sup>31</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1993).

<sup>32</sup> pp. 2-3.

# Material

## Fundamentalism as contested concept

Before I start my analysis of Abrahamian's argument against fundamentalism, a brief historic review of the term is required. Like many other concepts in social sciences, fundamentalism is a disputed term, which "still lacks a commonly accepted definition or application".<sup>33</sup> After all, the same label is used to describe Hezbollah, the militant Islamist movement in Lebanon as well as the pacifist Amish.

In recent years, ever since the attacks on Pentagon and the World Trade Centre in 2001, the term has been used on a variety of political and religious movements in the world. This generality of the term is in reality also its greatest weakness due to the simple fact that "any term which tried to cover everything would end up meaning nothing in particular, since signs work by virtue of their differences".<sup>34</sup>

Thus, in order for fundamentalism to be useful, it needs to be clearly defined in relation to the subject it tries to describe. How fundamentalism is defined, depends on the perspective one uses. It can be defined as an endeavour to defend the fundamentals in the faith. The early Protestant fundamentalists in the US fall within this category. This definition, which is perfectly reasonable, is a trans-historical definition that does not depend on the social context, and is not defined in relation to modernity.

In light of this view Martin Luther and also contemporary Muslim feminists can be regarded fundamentalists. The reason is simple enough. Martin Luther's attack on Rome and Catholic Church was based on two central beliefs: that the Bible is the central religious authority and that humans may reach salvation only by their faith and not by their deeds, which was an attack on Catholic Church's corrupt practice of selling 'indulgences' to absolve sin.<sup>35</sup> Luther's attack on the Vatican was in other words based on the fundamentals he defined, which Catholic Church had betrayed.

Contemporary Muslim feminists, who work for a feminist interpretation of the canons of Islam, argue in a similar way. In her criticism of the discrimination against women in the Saudi education system, Amani Hamdan- to take one example among many- argues: "it is vital to differentiate between the essential teachings of Islam on the one hand, and the diverse cultural practices that exist among Muslims on the other hand."<sup>36</sup> Here, the 'essential teachings of Islam' can be seen as the fundamentals, which is to be defended against 'the diverse cultural practices'.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Riesebrodt; M. op. cit. p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Eagleton; T. (1996); p. 103.

<sup>35</sup> Grane; L. (1994); pp. 68-88.

<sup>36</sup> Hamdan; A. (2012); p. 210. For similar arguments see Hamdan; A. (2005); p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> What Hamdan defines as the 'essential teachings of Islam', is beside the point here. The point is that in order for her to dismiss what she *defines* as 'the diverse cultural practices', she needs to refer to what she *defines* as the 'essentials teachings of Islam'. Obviously there are different interpretations of what constitute the 'essentials teachings of Islam', a fact that historically has led to different jurisprudential schools. To be sure one can argue about the choices of the 'essentials', the point here is simply that a set of 'essentials' are chosen (and not necessarily on an arbitrary basis) in order to criticise the non-essential aspects.

In fact this trans-historical definition makes it possible to even apply the term on secular phenomenon. Seen in this light, nearly every important thinker among socialists in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, be it V. I. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg or Antonio Gramsci, were all fundamentalists in that they were trying to find solutions to the political problems of their time by turning back to what they each in their own way defined as the fundamentals in Karl Marx's thoughts. Defined in this way, Khomeini and the Islamic movement during and after the revolution was not and, more importantly, could not<sup>38</sup> be fundamentalist.

Fundamentalism can also be defined as an anti-modernist movement born and developed within the bosom of modernity, a modern phenomenon, not in the sense that it is modern in its *Weltanschauung*, quite the contrary. It is defined as a modern phenomenon in the sense that it can only be generated in modern society.<sup>39</sup> I will return to this definition and explore this matter further.

There seems to be some resistance on using fundamentalism outside its birthplace in general, and a tendency to reject the concept *tout court* when it comes to Islam in particular. The first part is based on the fact that there are only Protestants in the US in the 1920s that ever used the term to describe themselves. There is no group among non-Christians, especially among Jews or Muslims who uses the term approvingly. The second part is that the term, being part of the Western culture, simply is incommensurable with the non-Western culture, be it the Muslim world or the Jewish one. These statements seem to have poor argumentative support though.

The argument-that no non-Christians can be fundamentalist-is marred by reinforcing fallacies. One is the claim of exclusion by origin: if you didn't start it, you can't have it. The other is the nominalist retreat to performer privilege: if you don't want the name, I must take it back.<sup>40</sup>

The problem with this 'originist' perspective is that, if accepted, then we cannot even use the term 'religion' in order to describe Christianity or Judaism, since nowhere in the Bible is the term 'religion' to be found. Nonetheless "places are incidentally significant, not historically decisive in the development of socioreligious movements."<sup>41</sup>

## Theological arguments against fundamentalism

Abrahamian's arguments for rejecting fundamentalism can be summarized in two main categories, the first one being religious or theological arguments and the second one sociological and historical ones. Based on these arguments "the transference of a

---

<sup>38</sup> Generally speaking, there is not much in the Islamic history that supports the Shi'ite version, and even less Khomeini's controversial and innovative interpretation of the Islamic history that enabled him to formulate his political program. In this regard, Khomeini was not a traditionalist, quite the contrary. "In fact, he was among the first learned religious scholars in Shi'ism to formulate the idea of a clergy-centered Islamic state." Moaddel; M. (2005); p.260. See Akhavi; Sh. (1999); pp. 99-100, and Arjomand; S. A. op. cit. pp. 98-99 for similar arguments.

See also further in this paper, p. 20 where the lack of historical support for Khomeini's political theory in the history of Islam is discussed at length.

<sup>39</sup> "One cannot speak of premodern fundamentalists. In the premodern era there were not the material conditions that made the coherence and communication of fundamentalist ideology possible."

Lawrence; B. B. op. cit. p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> p. 92.

<sup>41</sup> p. 93.

term [i. e. fundamentalism] invented by early twentieth-century Protestants in North America to a political movement in the contemporary Middle East is [...] misleading and even downright wrong.”<sup>42</sup>

### Fundamentalism; a brief history

The term fundamentalism was coined by Curtis Lee Lewis, the editor of *The Watchman-Examiner*, an American Baptist periodical, in a series of booklets called *The Fundamentals*, published between 1910 and 1915.<sup>43</sup> The movement presented conservative evangelical Protestants “as militants willing to do “battle royal” to preserve the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith”<sup>44</sup>. The ‘fundamentals’ being

- (i) inerrancy of the Bible,
- (ii) strong hostility to any modern theology and critical study of the Bible,
- (iii) exclusion of everyone who does not share their perspective as not ‘true Christians’.<sup>45</sup>

The idea that fundamentalism as a historical and sociological concept is inappropriate for other religions than evangelical Christianity is not a novel idea. The renowned Biblical scholar James Barr argues along similar lines:

Some kinds of Judaism are very conservative about the Bible. [...] Islam can also be said to be ‘fundamentalistic’: Muslims believe that the Qur’an was verbally revealed to the Prophet in its Arabic words, and the exact form of the text was divinely inspired; its purity cannot be questioned. [...] But the method of this discussion [regarding fundamentalism] will be to take the phenomenon within Christianity as the framework.<sup>46</sup>

However, as Bruce Lawrence argues against this perspective:

Barr’s analysis falters on two questionable assumptions: first, that “attitude toward scripture” can be isolated from other motives for espousing a fundamentalist posture, and second, that only Protestant Christians give unqualified priority to scripturalism in their religious outlook. The pivotal questions reverts to a definition that Barr never offers, the meaning of scripture.<sup>47</sup>

Abrahamian puts forward another, yet similar argument against the term fundamentalism. If fundamentalism is to be understood as the “acceptance of one’s scriptural text [...] [being] free of human error”, then every Muslim believer candidates for the post. “After all, it is an essential article of Islam that the entire Koran is the absolute word of God.”<sup>48</sup> Several years before Abrahamian published his essays on *khomeinism*, Rev. Patrick J Ryan, former President of Loyola Jesuit College, argued along similar lines by rhetorically asking:

Do so-called fundamentalist Muslims differ from other Muslims in their attitude towards the Scripture? Are the supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini [...] scriptural literalists opposed to the adaptation of scriptural themes to contemporary realities? [...] Does his Shi’ite orthodoxy consists of a more literal interpretation of the Koran than that favored by any other Iranian Muslim?<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 103, (1993); p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Riesebrodt; M. op. cit. p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Almond; G. A. et al. op. cit. p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Barr; J. (1978); p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Lawrence; B. B. op. cit. p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 103, Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ryan; P. J. (1984); pp. 437 & 440.

Nevertheless, Martin Riesebrodt argues against this standpoint, it being based on an incomplete understanding of Protestant fundamentalism, where it is wrongfully reduced to a “conflict between biblical criticism and biblical literalism or between the theory of evolution and the doctrine of creation.”<sup>50</sup>

Thus far we have seen that Islamic fundamentalism is rejected either by arguing that an alien Western concept simply cannot be applied on a non-Western phenomenon such as Islam, or that the concept is dismissed since, as the argument goes, literal interpretation is an essential part of being Muslim, and thus fundamentalism as a scientific concept is useless inasmuch as it means literal interpretation, and it cannot differentiate between what one means by fundamentalist Muslims and non-fundamentalist ones.

The problem is that the idea that literal interpretation being an essential part of Islam can hardly be defended against historical evidence. It is true that the ‘Ash’ari theology –somewhat simplified meaning traditionalist theology– is the dominant version within Muslim communities today<sup>51</sup>, but as early as 700 and 800 A.D. just a century after Islam’s birth, there was another school, the so called Mu’tazilites who had a contextual and rationalist reading of both the Qur’an and the Hadiths.<sup>52</sup>

Abrahamian’s rejection of fundamentalism because of its incompatibility with the Islamic movement in Iran seems to be based on a conflation between the etymology<sup>53</sup> and the definition of the term fundamentalism. This is a serious problem since if etymology is going to be the normative standard regarding a term’s usefulness in social sciences, then not many terms can qualify. What makes a scientific term useful is how it is defined and more crucial if the term can describe the social reality in a satisfactory manner or not.

### Khomeinism; a modern movement?

Abrahamian’s sociological and historical arguments revolve mainly around fundamentalism’s incompatibility with modernity. Thus the main arguments offered by him in this regard are to show the modernity of khomeinism. These arguments will be reviewed in order to grasp the points Abrahamian is making. Later on I will review the premises on which the arguments are built. Consequently the question to answer becomes: is fundamentalism incompatible with modernity?

Interestingly enough, Peter Berger makes an objection to a comparison between Protestant and Islamic fundamentalism that lands in the same conclusion as Abrahamian, though based on the opposite premises. According to Berger “the ideal

---

<sup>50</sup> Riesebrodt; M. op. cit. p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> The statement above needs some clarification. Nearly four decades of theocracy in Iran has made the demand for secularism, i. e. the separation of the state and religion one of the highest political demands in Iran. This does not necessarily mean a decline of religion; rather it is a demand for pluralism in interpretations and an end to the clerics monopolisation of God. Separation of the state and religion as a demand was even put forward by Ayatollah Montazeri, the highest authority within clerics. See Kadivar; M. op. cit. pp. 49-50.

The hierarchy has also failed to establish an official Islam contra ‘folk’s religion’, which can only exist as pluralism within interpretations. See Khaladji; M. op. cit. pp. 68-70.

<sup>52</sup> For a brief discussion regarding these traditions within Islam see Fazlhashemi; M. (2009).

<sup>53</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 105, Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 16.

order of protestant fundamentalism is found in the nineteenth century; it is a part of Western modernism. The ideal order of Islamic fundamentalism, in contrast, is in the seventh century; it is premodern and antimodern.”<sup>54</sup> Ernest Gellner, the famous British anthropologist also regards Islam as qualitatively different from other major faiths since only Islam resists secularization.

At the end of the Middle Ages, the Old World contained four major civilizations. Of these three are now, in one measure or another, secularized. Christian doctrine is bowdlerized by its own theologians, and deep, literal conviction is not conspicuous by its presence. In the Sinic world, a secular faith has become formally established and its religious predecessors disavowed. In the Indian world, a state and the elite are neutral viz. what is a pervasive folk religion, even if practices such as astrology continue to be widespread. But in one of the four civilizations, the Islamic, the situation is altogether different.<sup>55</sup>

### Abrahamian's argument against khomeinism as pre-modern

If fundamentalism means a rejection of the modern nation state or “a dogmatic adherence to tradition and rejection of modern society” then Khomeini was no fundamentalist. Furthermore since fundamentalism is starkly associated with inflexible orthodoxy, traditional authenticity and rejection of intellectual innovations, the term is a misnomer regarding Khomeini, as he not only “discarded many Shii concepts”, he freely borrowed words and slogans from the non-Muslim world.<sup>56</sup>

For Khomeini it was self-evident that Muslims need to import such “essentials as technology, industrial plants, and modern civilization”. In fact his disciples often mocked the traditional clerics for being ‘traditionalist’ and ‘old-fashioned’; for “obsessing over ritual purity; preventing their daughters from going to school; insisting that young girls should always be veiled, even when no men were present; denouncing such intellectual pursuits as art, music, and chess-playing; and, worst of all, refusing to take advantage of newspapers, electricity, cars, airplanes, telephones, radios and televisions.”<sup>57</sup> Martin Riesebrodt, arguing against Peter Berger makes a similar observation: “Islamic fundamentalism in no sense strives to do away with the petroleum industry, the modern mass communications media, the automobile, or modern weapon systems in order to restore the original community in technological or economic terms.”<sup>58</sup>

Interestingly enough these discussions did actually occur at the beginning of the post-revolutionary era among clerics. Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the most important figures in the hierarchy, who would become the future president in Iran, in a response to some parliamentary deputies’ questions regarding the Islamic precedents of some tax laws says: “Where in Islamic history do you find Parliament, President, Prime Minister, and Cabinet of Ministers? In fact, eighty per cent of what we do now has no precedent in Islamic history.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Riesebrodt; M. op. cit. p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Ernest Gellner, quoted in Shalghooni; M. R. (2002); p.25. For criticism of Gellner’s view on Islam, see ibid. Regarding the secularization process in the theocracy see especially Saleh-Pour; J. (1995) and Ganji; A. (1998).

<sup>56</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); pp. 104-105, Abrahamian; E. (1993); pp. 15-17.

<sup>57</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); pp. 104-105; Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 16.

<sup>58</sup> Riesebrodt; M. op. cit. p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani quoted in Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 104; Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 15.



Khomeini himself observing the rules relating to *khoms* and *zakat*<sup>60</sup> as being so out of their time that he called those who defended their use ‘ignorant’ and out of touch with the needs of modern society. “The share of the *imam* is only enough to run the seminaries [...] where are we going to get the share of the *imam* and the *sadat* [direct decedents of Mohammad – to whom *zakat* belongs] to run a government? We could not run all these people who are stuck to the government and cost money.”<sup>61</sup> Hojjati-Kermani another, disciple of Khomeini, argues by the same token. “These traditionalists should be labeled reactionary [...] for they want us to return to the age of the donkey. What we need is not the worship of the past but a genuine [...] [renaissance].”<sup>62</sup>

As Domenico Losurdo points it out, “to emphasize the fallacy of explaining fundamentalism through the simple dichotomy of premodern vs. modern, one must remember that in only one country in the Middle East has fundamentalism been successful—Iran, the most modern country both on the socioeconomic and political level.”<sup>63</sup>

The perspective that Khomeinism is a pre-modern movement, is not only in conflict with the factual Iranian modern political history, it is also unable to resolve several contradictions originating from the perspective. During the Constitutional revolution in Iran, Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri- the cleric with the highest rank within Tehran’s clergy who had joined the reactionary side and moved against the revolution- was condemned and sent to the gallows for “insisting on the ulama’s prerogatives as the sole interpreters of the law, and defending monarchical absolutism”<sup>64</sup> by a court consisting of high ranking clerics, such as Zanjani and Behbahani.<sup>65</sup> “About seventy-three years later, when, in the debates over the nature of the post-revolutionary regime, Ayatollah Khomeini attacked democracy as a Western concept, and thus alien to Islam, he was hailed”<sup>66</sup>, and thousands of Iranians were hoping to get a glimpse of his image in the moon.<sup>67</sup> Considering Khomeini and the Islamic movement that led the revolution a pre-modern phenomenon means nothing less than the amazing statement that the Iranian society was more pre-modern in the 1970s than in the 1910s, which is palpably false.

In light of this evidence one cannot but to think that viewing khomeinism as pre-modern is rather an article of faith in the Orientalist tradition than a scientifically researched hypothesis. Quite interesting, almost as if Khomeini is arguing against Peter Berger regarding the ideal of Islamic fundamentalism belonging to the pre-modern age, “in the euphoria of revolutionary success, he [i. e. Khomeini] boasted that the Islamic Republic of Iran had surpassed all previous Muslim societies, including that of the Prophet, in implementing true religion “in all spheres of life [...]” In short, the Islamic Republic of Iran had supplanted Mohammad’s Mecca and

<sup>60</sup> These are different kinds of religious taxes in Islam.

<sup>61</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini quoted in Shalghooni; M. R. op. cit. p.30 fn. 7.

<sup>62</sup> Mohammad Javad Hojjati Kermani quoted in Abrahamian; E. (1991); 105; (1993); p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> Losurdo; D. op. cit. p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Moaddel; M. (2005); p. 240.

<sup>65</sup> Khalaji; M. (2010); p. 101.

<sup>66</sup> Moaddel; M. (2005) p. 240.

<sup>67</sup> Shortly after Khomeini’s return to Iran there was this myth in the country that his image could be seen in the moon.

Imam Ali's Caliphate as the Muslim Golden Age"<sup>68</sup>; a statement among some traditionalists to be considered as blasphemy.

### Khomeini's political theory and his break with Shi'ite tradition<sup>69</sup>

Not only was Khomeini not a traditionalist, quite the contrary, he broke against the Shi'ite's eleven-century old tradition where the clergy "referred to [...] the *velayat-e faqih* (jurist's guardianship), as being predominantly apolitical."<sup>70</sup>

'The jurist's guardianship', perhaps the most important concept in Khomeini's political and religious discourse - "the cornerstone of the future Islamic Republic"<sup>71</sup> - historically meant the clergy's guardianship over those who were incapable of looking after their own interests: minors, widows and the insane. Even if the concept sometimes could be used of the clergy to intervene in political matters, it was abundantly clear that it was temporary and only when the whole community was endangered.

Khomeini's political activities started during the 1940s by following the traditional Shi'ite view.<sup>72</sup> His first major publication criticizes Reza Shah for a number of secular sins:

For closing down seminaries, expropriating religious endowments, propagating anticlerical sentiments, replacing *shari'a* courts with state ones, permitting the consumption of alcoholic beverages and the playing of 'sensuous music', forcing men to wear Western-style hats, establishing coeducational schools, and banning the long veil (*chador*) thus 'forcing women to go naked into the streets'.<sup>73</sup>

None of these 'sins' meant a denouncement of neither the state nor the monarchy. Although in some pages, he confronts Reza Shah as the enemy of religion and attacks the monarchy since "apart from the royalty of God, all royalty is against the interests of the people and oppressive; apart from the law of God, all laws are null [sic.] and absurd. A government of Islamic law, controlled by religious jurists (*faqih*s) [i. e. the clergy] will be superior to all the iniquitous governments of the world"<sup>74</sup>, he seems in general to accept the constitutional monarchy. He repeatedly emphasized that the clergy historically had been supportive of the monarchs, even when they had practiced anti-Islamic politics, because "bad order was better than no order at all"<sup>75</sup>.

Throughout the three decades between the 1940s until the 1970s Khomeini held this traditionalist view on the state. During the 1960s Mohammad Reza Pahlavi launched his so-called *White Revolution*, which was mainly about land reforms, to which Khomeini would refer as "the revolution intended to spread the colonial culture to remotest towns and villages and pollute the youth of the country."<sup>76</sup> Khomeini was

---

<sup>68</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); pp. 103-104, Abrahamian; E. (1993); pp. 14-15.

<sup>69</sup> For an ambitious treatment of the theories of state within Shi'ite jurisprudence cf. Kadivar; M. (1997).

<sup>70</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 108, Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 19.

<sup>71</sup> Abrahamian; E. (2008); p. 143.

<sup>72</sup> Moaddel; M. (2005); pp. 258-259. See also Richard; Y. (2003); pp. 191-192.

<sup>73</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 109. For similar arguments cf. (1982); p. 424, (1989); p. 20, and (1993); p. 20, same author.

<sup>74</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini quoted in Richard; Y. op. cit. p. 192.

<sup>75</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 109, Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 20.

<sup>76</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini quoted in Arjomand; S. A. op. cit. p. 99.

now the most vocal critic of these reforms among the clerics. However his main criticism was against how he meant the government had abused the clergy, how the Shah had become a tool for the “imperialist-Jewish conspiracy” and above all how the government was permitting women to vote in local elections, an un-Islamic act if any. The criticism against the *White Revolution*, eventually led to a confrontation between protestors and the military in June 1963. The protests were against a governmental bill publicized in 1962 according to which the profession of Islam was not a necessary condition for the electors and the candidates for the election of town councils. For Khomeini this was clearly the first step toward the abolition of Islam and “the enfranchisement of women was vigorously denounced as a ploy to destroy family life and spread prostitution.”<sup>77</sup>

Although Khomeini was far from the only cleric who protested against the Shah, his attacks differed radically from the rest. Where many clerics occupied themselves with the land reforms and women’s rights, “Khomeini, revealing a masterful grasp of mass politics, scrupulously avoided the former issue and instead hammered away on a host of other concerns that arose greater indignation among the general population.”<sup>78</sup> He accused the Shah for being corrupt, rigging elections, jeopardizing the universities independence, violating the constitutional law, neglecting the economic needs of peasants and workers, and undermining Islam.<sup>79</sup>

Khomeini’s break with the traditional Shi’ite view on monarchy and the state came in early the 1970s when he lived in exile in Najaf, Iraq. During the same time social tensions were increasingly sharpened within the Iranian society. The land reforms’ complete and utter failure had resulted in a ruined countryside and agriculture, and the poor peasants were now flooding the shantytowns in every major city.

By the time of the revolution, 46 per cent of the country’s population lived in urban centers. [...] Having received no land whatsoever, they [the rural laborers] survived as farm hands, shepherds, laborers, day commuters to nearby towns, and wage earners employed in the many small plants that flourished in the countryside during the early 1970s – small plants manufacturing carpets, shoes, clothes, and paper. Some migrated to the urban centers. Thus the White Revolution failed to provide land to the bulk of the rural population.<sup>80</sup>

In his frontal attack on the government, Khomeini avoided esoteric questions and made his argument based on the socio-economic conditions in the land, by kidnapping key concepts from the Marxists dressed in his specific language:

Through the political agents they have placed in power over the people, the imperialists have also imposed on us an unjust economic order, and thereby divided our people in two groups: oppressors and oppressed. Hundreds of millions of Muslims are hungry and deprived of all forms of health care and education, while minorities comprised of all the wealthy and powerful live a life of indulgence, licentiousness, and corruption. The hungry and deprived have constantly struggled to free themselves from the oppression of their plundering

<sup>77</sup> Arjomand; S. A. op. cit. p. 85. For an account of the protests in June 1963, which is generally seen as the start of the Islamic revolution and the starting point for Khomeini to become the revolution’s indisputable leader, see Abrahamian; E. (1982); pp. 424-426, Abrahamian; E. (1989); pp.20-21, Moin; B. (1999); Chapter 6 and Nedjati; Gh. R. op. cit. vol. i. pp. 221-238.

<sup>78</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1982); p. 425; see also Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 113.

<sup>79</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1982); p. 425.

<sup>80</sup> Abrahamian; E. (2008); p. 139.

overlords, and their struggle continues to this day. But their way is blocked by ruling minorities and the oppressive governmental structures they lead.<sup>81</sup>

In order to grasp Khomeini's radical break with Shi'ite tradition about authority over the Muslim community, a brief review of the concept *imamate* is needed. In the Shi'ite tradition there is only the Imams- direct decedents to the Prophet (via Fatima his daughter) and Ali the first Imam- who is entitled to rule the Muslim community. There had been a total of twelve Imams and the twelfth "went into "occultation" in the ninth century leaving behind four successive interpreters of his will. After the death of the fourth, during the "greater occultation" (which continues to the present), there is no infallible interpreter of the Twelfth Imam's will until he reappears as the Mahdi to institute the realm of perfection and justice."<sup>82</sup> Khomeini's "achievement was to mount a theoretical argument that empowered precisely the clergy to take over executive power and rule on the Imam's behalf until his return."<sup>83</sup>

To this end Khomeini tried to use the historic sources to support his new and radical interpretation regarding the questions of the authority. The difficulties in this task stemmed from the near total absence of references to Imams in the Qur'an. Neither were the traditions of the Prophet (the Sunna) of much help. Instead Khomeini referred to a statement by the sixth Imam Ja'far (d. 765) that allegedly empowered judges to rule the Shi'ite community in the absence of the Imam. "On closer inspection, however, it would appear that the tradition in question authorizes the clergy not to exercise sovereign rule but simply to give a ruling in technical disputes over inheritance or debts." Khomeini's solution to the problem was that he

invoked reason as a source of law and maintained that, since the sources contained many references to the clergy as the "fortresses of Islam" and the like, they were the logical referents when the sacred texts made mention of leaders of the community after the Prophet's death.<sup>84</sup>

In a series of lectures that came to be collected as *Velayat-e faqih: Hokoumat-e eslami*<sup>85</sup> (*The Governance of the Jurist: Islamic Government*)<sup>86</sup>, Khomeini breaks radically with the traditionalist Shi'ite political discourse and view on the state. He would now argue that Islam is inherently incompatible with all forms of monarchy, due to their pagan origin and despotic nature. The rejection of monarchy and monarchs had an old lineage in the Abrahamic religions dating all the way back to Moses who had opposed the Pharaohs, i. e. the monarch of his time. According to this novel interpretation of the Islamic history, opposition against monarchs was a sacred duty up to and including the duty to rise up against the government.<sup>87</sup>

How can we stay silent and idle today, when we see that a band of traitors and usurpers, the agents of foreign powers, have appropriated the wealth and the fruits of labor of hundreds of millions of Muslims- thanks to the support of their masters and through the power of the bayonet-granting the Muslims not the least right to prosperity? It is the duty of Islamic scholars and all Muslims to put an end to this system of oppression and, for the sake of the

---

<sup>81</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini quoted in Moaddel; M. (2005); p. 259.

<sup>82</sup> Keddie; N. R. (2003); p. 7, See also Akhavi; Sh. op. cit. pp. 99-100.

<sup>83</sup> Akhavi; Sh. op. cit. p. 100.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Khomeini; R. M. (1970).

<sup>86</sup> See also Richard; Y. op. cit. p. 193 for a brief review of the main themes in the book.

<sup>87</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1993); pp. 23-25.

well-being of hundreds of millions of human beings, to overthrow these oppressive governments and form an Islamic government.<sup>88</sup>

This was indeed a radical break with Khomeini's and the clergy's traditional view. One can also depict the same break in Khomeini's writings regarding society. In the sermons and lectures and publications before the 1970s he hardly uses the terms class or revolution, given that both had strong leftist connotations. The change in his language is quite conspicuous in his post-1970s writings where he analyses the society in new ways. According to this new discourse, society consists of two opposing classes, *mostazafin* (the oppressed) and *mostakberin* (the oppressors), or the poor against the rich.<sup>89</sup>

More than anything else the new terminology reveals Khomeini's populism. These terms, originating from the Marxist tradition in Iran, went through a transformation at Khomeini's hand. Where Marxists used working class versus bourgeoisie in the international Communist tradition, mainly as political and sociological categories, in Khomeini's writing it was transformed to "a loose term used to depict the general populace: the meek, the poor, the masses, the powerless, the disinherited, the exploited, the dispossessed and, for some, the sansculottes<sup>90</sup> [sic.] and the wretched of the earth"<sup>91</sup>, in other words a moral judgment.

Maybe even more obvious was the way the term martyr (*shahid*) was transformed. Before the 1970s he rarely used the term and when it was used, it was in the "conventional sense of the famous Shi'i saints who, in obeying God's will, had gone to their deaths", and for Khomeini the term could never be used to describe an average person dying in the streets for the cause. This would also change radically during the revolutionary years, 1977-1979, when Khomeini "constantly lauded anyone killed in streets as a glorious *shahid*- as a revolutionary martyr."<sup>92</sup> As usual Khomeini more or less plagiarized the other revolutionary movements, notably the Tude party (Communist Party), the Mojahedin and the Leftist Guerrilla Movement in Iran, who referred to their fallen comrades as martyrs.

Even if the term *martyr* went through a radical change in Khomeini's vocabulary, the term did in any case exist even in the religious discourse. Khomeini's abuse of 1<sup>st</sup>-of-May tradition in Iran is even more striking. Late in April 1979, shortly after Khomeini had taken over the state apparatus, the Islamists, now organized in the *Islamic Republic Party*, discovered that every leftist organization in the country was preparing to celebrate the 1<sup>st</sup>-of-May. In order not to fall behind, the government announced its plan to organize its own May Day rally. In his speech, Khomeini warned workers of non-believers and reminded them of their true guardians, i. e. Islam. In order to suppress the leftist organizations the government upped the minimum wage and declared the day a paid public holiday. More strikingly Khomeini declared: "Every

---

<sup>88</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini quoted in Moaddel; M. (2005); p. 260.

<sup>89</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); pp. 112-113, Abrahamian; E. (1993); pp. 26-27.

<sup>90</sup> The aristocrats in the pre-revolutionary France to describe the common people of the third estate originally used sans-Culotte, literally meaning 'without short trousers' as an insult. Eventually the revolutionaries adopted the term.

<sup>91</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1989); p. 22.

<sup>92</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 27.

day should be considered Workers' Day for labor is the source of all things, even of heaven and hell as well as of the atom particle."<sup>93</sup>

Through the modern history of Iran, thanks to the size of the organized working class and leftist organizations, notably the Tude party, the 1<sup>st</sup>-of-May was a major event in the public opinion. Not surprisingly did the secular organizations get the most support from the unions, even though the newspapers in Iran, being scrutinized, did not dare to compare the size of the different rallies. However the *New York Times* wrote that the Islamic Republic Party (i. e. the core organization of Khomeini's followers) drew 30,000, while the leftist organizations together had more than 100,000 participants.<sup>94</sup>

In this context the clerics had no other choice than to nullify the Marxist tradition and Organizations in the country. In order to accomplish this goal they had to adapt to the situations, as they would occur and to take over the secular language of the Marxists by transforming it to a religious one. Nowhere is the populist language of Khomeini more visible than in his anti-imperialist statements. By inventing populist slogans such as "neither West, nor East, Islamic Republic", "Mostazafin (the oppressed) of the world unite", "The oppressed nations of the world should unite against their imperialist oppressors!"<sup>95</sup> he could present the Islamic Republic as the alternative fighting for social justice and the independence of Iran, some of the most acute concerns of the revolutionary movement.

---

<sup>93</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini quoted in Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 71.

<sup>94</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1993); pp. 72-73.

<sup>95</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomein; 1<sup>st</sup>-of-May Day 1979, speech quoted in Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 114.

# Analysis

## Fundamentalism and modernity; a contradictory relation

If you should go skating  
on the thin ice of modern life  
dragging behind you the silent reproach  
of a million tear-stained eyes  
don't be surprised when a crack in the ice  
appears under your feet.  
You slip out of your depth and out of your mind  
with your fear flowing out behind you  
as you claw the thin ice.<sup>96</sup>

As we have seen in the last part, Abrahamian uses historical arguments to disprove of the perspective on khomeinism as a pre-modern and traditionalist movement. We have also seen that he defines fundamentalism mainly in relation to its origin, and thus come to the conclusion that khomeinism “has less in common with conventional fundamentalism than with Third World populism, especially in Latin America.”<sup>97</sup>

In this section I will examine the relationship between fundamentalism and modernity. As we will see, it is possible and plausible to define fundamentalism in such a way that makes it perfectly compatible with modernity.

Let us start by defining *Fundamentalism*, *Modernity* and *Modernism*.

*Fundamentalism* is the affirmation of religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction; it is expressed through the collective demand that specific creedal and ethical dictates derived from scripture be publicly recognized and legally enforced.

*Modernity* is the emergence of a new index of human life shaped, above all, by increasing bureaucratization and rationalization as well as technical capacities and global exchange unthinkable in the premodern era.

*Modernism* is the search for individual autonomy driven by a set of socially encoded values emphasizing change over continuity; quantity over quality; efficient production, power, and profit over sympathy for traditional values or vocations, in both the public and private spheres.<sup>98</sup>

According to this view, fundamentalism is a reactive movement. These “movements form in reaction to, and in defence against, the processes and consequences of secularization and modernization which have penetrated the larger religious community.”<sup>99</sup>

Herein lies the paradox within fundamentalism’s relationship with modernism. Bruce Lawrence, in following Marshal Berman’s classic work on modernity and modernism *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience Of Modernity*, makes a distinction

---

<sup>96</sup> Pink Floyd; (1979); track 2.

<sup>97</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1991); p. 118, Abrahamian; E. (1993); p. 17.

<sup>98</sup> Lawrence; B. B. op. cit. p. 27.

<sup>99</sup> Almond; G. A. et al. op. cit. p. 93.

between modernity and modernism and explains, “fundamentalists are moderns but they are not modernists. [On the contrary, they] oppose modernism and its proponents”.<sup>100</sup> In other words

“Fundamentalism”, [...] refers to a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled “true believers” attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternative to secular institutions and behaviours.<sup>101</sup>

Consequently fundamentalism is a religious response to the marginalization of religion and the increasing anxiety that follows the process of modernization, individualization, secularization and the disintegration of the religious community. Therefore fundamentalism is one way among many to respond to the identity crisis that occurs as a consequence of modernization and urbanization. Hence

without modernity, there are no fundamentalists, just as there are no modernists. The identity of fundamentalism, both as a psychological mindset and a historical movement, is shaped by the modern world. Fundamentalists seem bifurcated between their cause and their outcome; they are at once the consequence of modernity and the antithesis of modernism.<sup>102</sup>

This is the reason why fundamentalists are selective in their relation to modernity.<sup>103</sup> Fundamentalism is thus a reaction to an insecure world- a world where relativism, pluralism, secularism and the indeterminacy of modern ideologies- is making *God* the absolute and infallible judge obsolete. In other words, “the latent significance of modernity is humanity’s revolt against God.”<sup>104</sup>

In this urbanized and modernized world, individualism replaces the safe and secure ground of religious community and every individual is forced to be responsible for themselves. In this milieu one “is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air.”<sup>105</sup> In such a “heartless world” and such “soulless conditions”, “*religious* misery is at one and the same time the *expression* of real misery and a protest against real misery.”<sup>106</sup>

Through modern ideologies such as rationalism, relativism, pluralism or secularism, modernity undermines the “Divine Transcendent, challenging his revelations, denying his prophets, ignoring his morally guided community.” In such a world “the righteous remnants are emissaries of an All-Powerful, All-Knowing Being who has been betrayed by the freedom he granted the modern age. Who are the fundamentalists? They are the last-ditch defenders of God.”<sup>107</sup> Thus fundamentalism in this respect is a religious-political response to the identity crisis and the existential anxiety brought upon by modernity.

---

<sup>100</sup> Lawrence; M. op. cit. pp. 1 & 2.

<sup>101</sup> Almond; G. A. op. cit. p. 17, italics removed.

<sup>102</sup> Lawrence; B. B. op. cit. p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> Almond; G. A.; op. cit. pp. 94-95.

<sup>104</sup> Almond; G. A. op. cit. p. 38.

<sup>105</sup> Marshal Berman quoted in Lawrence; B. B. op. cit. p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> Marx; K. (1981); p. 378.

<sup>107</sup> Lawrence; B. B. op. cit. ix.



In light of this perspective let me review the pre-revolutionary Iranian society. It is true that Khomeini referred to political repression, the uneven distribution of the nation's wealth, the destitute marginalized people struggling in the shantytowns. But that alone cannot explain the success of the Islamic discourse, especially if one considers the fact that during the 1960s and the 1970s, i. e. the formative period of the Islamic revolutionary discourse, the Iranian economy bloomed more than ever before.

During this formative and imperative period, it was not only the clerics who referred to Islam as the universal solution to all the social and political problems in the country. The rapid cultural Westernization that occurred after the 1953 coup d'état, together with "massive rural-urban migration; cultural alienation; autocracy; hostility to the US"<sup>108</sup> created a natural ground for popular resentment and an increasing anti-Westernism.<sup>109</sup> "If a significant section of the intellectual leaders found an Islamic solution meaningful, it was principally due to the very fact that they all faced the same ideological target-the secularist ideology of the monarchy."<sup>110</sup>

The themes of Shi'i revolutionary discourse (that Iran's problem was related to the West's cultural domination and the un-Islamic nature of the institution of monarchy, and that there was a religious solution to these problems) contradicted in essence the monarchy-centered nationalist discourse.<sup>111</sup>

Jalal Al-e Ahmad, the leading intellectual of a new generation Iranian thinkers summarized the nation's identity crisis in his book *Westoxication*. A former member of the Tude (Communist) Party, he had converted to Islam and in a reinterpretation of the Iranian history, he targeted the Westoxication, i. e. adherence to ideas foreign to the Iranian culture as the main problem and a return to the cultural roots of the Iranian people, which he found in Islam, as the political solution.<sup>112</sup>

By offering an absolute and inerrant reference-point, namely the "privileged school of Islamic jurisprudence"<sup>113</sup>, Khomeini could offer a simplistic solution to a nation in crisis. If uncertainty, relativism and individualism is modernity's birthmark, where "the total responsibility of every human being is on herself"<sup>114</sup>, Khomeinism is the direct opposite. "The Islamic government is the rule of divine laws on the nation. [...] In this government the governance belongs to God, and the law is God's order. Everyone, from the Prophet to the Caliphs have to obey God's law."<sup>115</sup>

## Theocracy and the ideological state

The post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran is more than anything else an ideological state. By that I mean a political system where the rulers are trying to reorganize and reshape the totality of the society after their ideology. This is the main reason why the

<sup>108</sup> Keddie; N. R. (1995); p. 15.

<sup>109</sup> Richard; Y. op. cit. p. 187.

<sup>110</sup> Moaddel; M. (2005); p. 250. "The postcoup social critics ideologues began to resort to Islam in their attempt's to address Iran's problem." Moaddel; M. (1993); p. 144.

<sup>111</sup> Moaddel; M. (1993); p. 268.

<sup>112</sup> For a brief review of Al-e Ahmad's important contribution to the Islamic political discourse in the pre-revolutionary period see Richard; Y. op. cit. pp. 189-190 & Moaddel; M. (2005); pp. 251-255.

<sup>113</sup> Almond; G. A. op. cit. p. 96.

<sup>114</sup> Sartre; J. P. (1988); p. 37.

<sup>115</sup> Khomeini; R. M. op. cit. pp. 46 & 47. See also Kadivar; M. (1997); vol. i; pp. 41-48.

theocracy from the very beginning has been engaged in an erosive and destructive *kulturkampf* against the whole civil society, *including* the clerics.

In fact the fundamentalist nature of the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran is best seen in its treatment of the clergy and seminaries in the country. For the first time in history the order of the religious seminaries and its internal hierarchy is directly dependent to the state.<sup>116</sup> Before the revolution in 1979, no institution -religious or political- had the right to ex-communicate a member of the clergy. After the revolution Khomeini created *the Special Court for the Clerics*, which has been functioning as the sword of Damocles. In the early days of the revolution the special court functioned as a protection for the clerics by making them untouchable by the civil court. As time has passed, the same court has been used as a very effective tool for “prohibiting the influence of misguided clerics in the seminaries [...] and for punishing disobedient members of clerics.”<sup>117</sup> The special court system is today functioning as an independent punishment system where it has its own prison and intelligent police who scrutinize every single movement within the clergy, by reporting directly to the Islamic Republic’s leader.

The Cultural Revolution in the early days after the clerics had seized political power is another illuminating example of Khomeini’s fundamentalism. By pointing out the universities and schools as the main enemy, due to “the fatal attacks against the nation from the universities and westernized scholars [...] [being] more lethal than the wounds governments bayonets caused”<sup>118</sup> the state

pursued an “Islamization” program whose goal was to eliminate all forms of cultural resistance to ulama [i. e. the clerics] rule. The government kept closed all the universities and colleges for over three years, during which the university curricula were rewritten. By 1984, [...] nearly 15 percent of all the required courses for a bachelor’s degree were in the area of (Shi’i) religion. Similar changes were also made in the content of elementary and high school curricula. Courses dealing with evolution and portions of biological and geological courses were omitted from the school curriculum. In turn the number of required courses on religion increased considerably. Thousands of school teachers and university professors were purged. [...] In high schools, the use of laboratory experiments and scientific field trips were eliminated, while the performance of religious ceremonies increased considerably. Closed to four thousand university professors were purged. At Tehran University, the number of scientific personnel declined from 2,100 in 1978 to 1,500 in 1984. And the Minister of Sciences, in his report to the parliament, confessed that the number of university professors had declined from 13,900 in 1978 to 6500 in 1984.<sup>119</sup>

In the dualistic and black and white worldview<sup>120</sup> that constitutes the official ideology of the theocracy in Iran, there is simply one correct version of Islam, the government’s version. Hence plenty of classic works in theology are being reprinted, but if and only if they do pass the state’s requirements of right and wrong.<sup>121</sup>

The post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran, by its anachronism is more than anything else an ideological state, where the government’s defence of the cleric’s privatization of political power is its *raison d’être*. The history of the Labour Code is illuminating

---

<sup>116</sup> Khalaji; M. op. cit. p. 41.

<sup>117</sup> pp. 50-51.

<sup>118</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini quoted in Khaladji; M. op. cit. p. 59.

<sup>119</sup> Moaddel; M. (1993); p. 213 & 263.

<sup>120</sup> For a brief discussion on this feature of fundamentalism cf. Almond; G. A. op. cit. p. 38.

<sup>121</sup> Khaladji; M. op. cit. pp. 64-65; fn. 2.

in this respect. For years the unambiguous contradiction between normally accepted labour laws in modern capitalist societies and the principles of Islamic *sharia* meant that efforts to establish a code was doomed. Khomeini was worried that this festering dispute would aggravate extensive labour turmoil, especially in the heat of the Iran-Iraq war. He therefore pronounced a *fatwa* authorizing the ratification of the Labour Code by the parliament in 1987. He bypassed its incompatibility with the principles of Islamic jurisprudence by subsuming these under the umbrella of *the Expedience of the System*. When he was criticized by some of his bewildered followers, he argued:

Government which is a branch of the absolute rule of Allah's prophet [...] is one of Islam's primary commandments (*ahkam*) and has priority over all subordinate commandments including prayers, fasting, and the *haj*. [i. e. pilgrimage] Government can stop any undertaking, whether devotional or non-devotional whose conduct is against the interests of Islam, [and] for as long as it remains such.<sup>122</sup>

On the surface of it, this passage is evident proof that the theocracy in Iran is loosing its religious character. The reality is the opposite. What Khomeini does in this manoeuvre, is elevating the clerics to semi-God positions, where the arbitrariness of their power is painfully obvious. *The Expedience of the System* means that even God's word can be broken when the clerics need to rescue its privileged position. Needless to say, it falls upon the clerics to decide when and what laws to break.

By downplaying the role of ideology Abrahamian seems, as we have seen, to believe that the theocracy in Iran "contains the potential for change and acceptance of modernity- even eventually of political pluralism, gender equality, individual rights, and social democracy."<sup>123</sup> He makes this assertion based on the pragmatic manoeuvres of Khomeini, among which he takes Khomeini's change of heart regarding women's right to vote.<sup>124</sup>

However Khomeini's change of view on women's political right has to be explained due to historical circumstances in the revolutionary years. During the revolutionary years 1977-1979, every major city in Iran was filled with people protesting against the Pahlavi's dictatorship, and Iranian women were a major part of the revolutionary movement. To go against women's right to vote in such circumstances would be nothing less than political suicide for Khomeini and his supporters. However, as the events regarding the first International Women's Day on 8<sup>th</sup> of March in 1979 shows, this does not imply that Khomeini would yield to any democratic demands.

On that day, Iranian women activists and their male supporters demonstrated in Tehran and Qom against an order for women to re-veil themselves in the traditional chador worn by highly religious women. The demonstrations continued for five days. At their height, they attracted tens of thousands in Tehran, men as well as women. Some leftist men formed a cordon around the women, fighting off armed attackers from a newly formed group, the Hezbollah or "Party of God". The demonstrators chanted "No to the Chador," "Down with the Dictatorship," and even

---

<sup>122</sup> Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, quoted in Shalghooni; M. R. op. cit. p. 28. "[...] Two *fatwas* [were] issued by Khomeini in late 1987 and early 1988 dealing with the hegemonic power of the state. In defending the state's power to impose sanctions on those refusing to obey the laws, Khomeini wrote that the state could even abrogate one of the five pillars of Islam if it saw that this was necessary for the safeguarding of the 1979 revolution. In his reasoning, the Iranian state and the revolution that had spawned it were tantamount to Islam itself." Akhavi; Sh. op. cit. p. 101.

<sup>123</sup> Abrahamian; E. (1993); pp. 2-3.

<sup>124</sup> pp. 33-34.

the occasional “Down with Khomeini.” One banner read, “We made the Revolution for Freedom, But Got Unfreedom,” while other proclaimed “In The Down of Freedom, We Have No freedom.” For their part, the Hezbollah chanted “You will cover yourselves or be beaten,” but their responses was mainly nonverbal; stones, knives, and even bullets.<sup>125</sup>

Khomeini was quite candid in his writings before the revolution in categorically rejecting democracy. In his lectures on *the Governance of the Jurisprudential*, he is absolutely clear on this point.

Islamic government is conditional, not in the sense that it depends on the will of the majority, but the governors are conditioned in executing the laws in the Qur'an and the Sunna. [...] Being just and knowing the law is the requirements for the jurists to rule. [...] It's a common mistake to believe that the Prophet had more to as ruler, than other jurists. He was more virtuous than anyone else, but that doesn't mean he had more to say as a ruler.<sup>126</sup>

Consequently, Khomeini cut the Gordian knot of the ancient *Euthyphro dilemma* formulated by Plato<sup>127</sup>, by raising the clerics to God-like positions. Virtue was now by definition what the government defined it to be in the post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>128</sup>

As we see here, the clerics in Khomeini's radical interpretation of Islam is above society and have *ipso facto* a privileged position. To focus on the fact that he changed his mind on women's right to vote is to be unable to see the wood for all the trees, because in Khomeini's political theory, not only women, but every citizen lacks political rights.

To see this, suppose that the government in Iran would remove every obstacle for a free political election, and even would allow international observers. Nevertheless, according to the constitution the leader of the theocracy has the legal authority to dismiss every election.

In his comparison between the theocracy in Iran and populist dictatorships in Latin America, Abrahamian misses several characteristics of the post-revolutionary hierarchy. Unlike 'normal' dictatorships, the theocracy in Iran is an active dictatorship, which means that the state is always trying to eliminate differences between the private and the public spheres and even tries to eliminate the civil society. During the Pahlavi dynasty, political activism, especially with democratic ambitions, could never be tolerated. However the repression in the theocracy is not

<sup>125</sup> Afari, J. & Anderson, K. (2005); p. 111.

<sup>126</sup> Khomeini, R. M. op. cit. pp. 45 & 55.

<sup>127</sup> In philosophy of religion, *the Euthyphro Dilemma* is held as a refutation of the Divine Command theory. The dilemma is based on a question asked by Socrates in Euthyphro: “Are morally good acts willed by God because they are morally good, or are they morally good because they are willed by God?” An argument is then built around each of these possibilities to refute the Divine Command theory.

<sup>128</sup> “Two citations from senior members of the regime, Ayatollah Rabbani 'Amlashi and Ayatollah Mu'min [is illuminating in this respect.]: “Obedience to vilayat-i faqih is an incumbent duty . . . like the daily prayer and fasting, and disobeying it is like disobeying the Islamic sacred law.” “The legitimacy and legality of whatever is done and whatever institutions exist is due to the fact that they are buttressed by vilayat-i faqih. As the vali-yi faqih is at the head of all affairs and main guarantor of the current laws of the country, it is the divinely ordained duty of all the people to follow every law which is passed and given to the Islamic government for execution. Disobeying such a law is as forbidden as drinking wine is forbidden by Islam.” Akhavi; Sh. op. cit. p. 101.

‘only’ political, the repression is above anything else a civil repression, i. e. the state actively surveys and represses every deviation from the state’s official ideology.

The legitimacy of the theocracy has been decreasing ever since the clergy seized political power. Parallel with the loss of political legitimacy, the state’s repression has increased and got more and more arbitrary. Generally speaking, in order for a state to survive, it needs to balance between leadership “based on consent, and “domination” [...] based on coercion.”<sup>129</sup> Khomeini’s manoeuvres during the revolutionary years, before the consolidation of the state and its reign of terror to get a full grasp of society, need to be explained from the fact the Khomeini seized political power through a popular mass revolution. In order to deprive the millions of people -who were actively participating in the revolutionary process- from every political right, Khomeini needed to be populist and act according to Machiavelli.<sup>130</sup>

Some clarification is needed here. *Nota bene* the arguments above do not refute Abrahamian’s argument *per se*. The ‘essence’ of a political body does not in itself imply neither the ability to reform itself, nor the inability to do so. Stated differently, whether the theocracy in Iran is understood to be populist or fundamentalist, does not affect the question above. In order to be able to answer the question scientifically and not by faith, one needs to examine the social, economic and political context on the subject.

Dictatorships generally employ political reforms if the reforms strengthen the political order.<sup>131</sup> The *White Revolution* in the 1960s is one example. The monarchy was under pressure from the US to respect human rights. A decade after the coup d’état, when the state had eliminated every resistance, liberal or Marxist, the Shah announced that he himself would introduce the reforms that “ushered in a short “breathing period””.<sup>132</sup> He did so, because he was certain he had a tight grasp on the population and any objection could be effectively crushed.

The situation in the post-revolutionary hierocracy is quite different. From its very beginning, the theocracy has been forced to rule with the iron fist. Every little reform can jeopardize its whole existence. One should remember that a yearlong protest movement in every major city in Iran preceded the Arab Spring. The reason the theocracy in Iran is not capable to reform itself has nothing to do with its ‘essence’. The theocracy’s inability to reform the political system stems from the fact that every reform, how small and insignificant it might be, makes the system even more vulnerable.

In comparing khomeinism with Third World populism, Abrahamian also seems to downplay the anachronism of the theocracy in Iran. In contemporary capitalism there is a clear separation between the political and the economic spheres.

---

<sup>129</sup> Lawner; L. (1975); p. 42.

<sup>130</sup> Machiavelli; N. (1968). Especially chapters ix, xii, xviii, xix.

<sup>131</sup> As Alexis de Tocqueville argues in his analysis of the 1789 revolution in France: “Experience teaches us that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it starts to reform itself.” de Tocqueville; A. (1866); p. 283.

<sup>132</sup> Moaddel; M. (1993); p. 142.

The differentiation of the economic sphere in capitalism, [...] the social function of production and distribution, surplus extraction and appropriation, and the allocation of social labour are, so to speak, privatized and they are achieved by non-authoritative, non political means. In other words, the social allocation of resources and labour does not, on the whole, take place by means of political direction, communal deliberation, hereditary duty, custom, or religious obligation, but rather through the mechanisms of commodity exchange.<sup>133</sup>

The case of the theocracy in Iran is the opposite. The cleric's political power is the *sine qua non* of its economic power. In fact the more we have moved from the days of the revolution in 1979, the more ideological the state has become. During the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Millennialism and Messianism were much more ubiquitous than ever before.<sup>134</sup>

## Final reflections

In this last section I will review the questions stated at the beginning. The strength of Abrahamian's criticism of fundamentalism as a concept lies in the fact that he analyses the Iranian case in its own right and not simply as part of the Muslim world. In this he makes a strong case against the view that sees religion as the main force in an otherwise passive Muslim culture. Furthermore he has been able to empirically show the modern nature of khomeinism as a political and social movement.

As we have seen fundamentalism is generally rejected, by a reference to its Western and un-Islamic origin. Abrahamian's rejection is beside 'originism', supported by its supposedly incommensurability with modernity. Thus we arrive at the second question, i. e the relationship between modernity and fundamentalism. In the final stance this is a question of definition and as I have been trying to argue, there is a perfectly valid and reasonable definition of fundamentalism as an anti-modernist phenomenon generated through modernity.

Furthermore, regarding the question of fundamentalism vs. populism I have been arguing that Khomeini's populism is more a consequence of the fact that the clerics in Iran came to power through a popular political revolution, and hence the populist character of the theocracy is part of the state's attempts to legitimize its anti-democratic rule.

In the light of what I have been examining, rejecting fundamentalism as an analytical tool in describing the post-revolutionary hierocracy in Iran seems impetuous. The next question that naturally rises, is how khomeinism in a modern country like Iran in 1979 could be the determinative revolutionary force that not only defeated the monarchy, it also outmanoeuvred the secular discourses, be it Marxism or Liberal Nationalism. However, this question requires its own paper.

---

<sup>133</sup> Meiksins Wood; E. (1995); p. 29.

<sup>134</sup> For a brief discussion on Millennialism and Messianism in the period cf. Khaladji; M. op. cit. Chapter 4.

# Bibliography:

## Books

- Abrahamian; E. (1982); *Iran between two revolutions*, Princeton, Princeton UP.  
(1989); *The Iranian Mujahedin*, New Haven, Yale UP.  
(1993); *Khomeinism*, London, California UP.  
(2008); *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.
- Afari; J. & Anderson; K. (2005); *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seduction of Islamism*, Chicago, Chicago UP.
- Almond; G. A et al. (2003); *Strong Religion*, Chicago, Chicago UP.
- Arjomand; S. A. (1988); *The Turban for the Crown*, New York, Oxford UP.
- Barr; J. (1978); *Fundamentalism*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press.
- de Tocqueville; A. (1866); *l'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, Paris, Miche Lévy Frères.
- Cockburn; P. (2015); *The Rise of Islamic State*, London, Verso.
- Eagleton; T. (1996); *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.
- Fazlhashemi; M. (2009); *kontextuell tolkning av islams urkunder*, in *Att tolka Bibeln och Koranen*, Stenström; H. (red.), Lund, Studentlitteratur.
- Grane; L. (1994); *Vision och verklighet, en bok om Martin Luther*, Skellefteå, Artos.
- Kadivar; M. (1997); *State Theories within Shi'ite Jurisprudence*, 2 vols. Tehran, Ney Publisher [in Persian].
- Keddie; N. R. (1995); *Iran and the Muslim World*, New York, NYUP.  
(2003); *Modern Iran; Roots and Results of Revolution*, New Haven, Yale UP.
- Khaladji; M. (2010); *The New Order of the Clerical Establishment in Iran*, Bochum, Aida Verlag [in Persian].
- Khomeini; R. M. (1970); *The Governance of the Jurist: Islamic Government*, [in Persian].
- Kurzman; Ch. (2004); *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Massachusetts, Harvard UP.
- Lawner; L. (1975); "Introduction", in *Letters from Prison*, Gramsci; A. pp. 1-56, London, Low & Brydone.
- Lawrence; B. B. (1989); *Defenders of God*, New York, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- Machiavelli; N. (1968); *Prince*, Amsterdam, Da Capo Press.
- Marty; M. E. & Appleby; R. S. (ed.) *Fundamentalism Observed*, Chicago, Chicago UP.
- Marx; K. (1981); *Zur Kritik der Hegleschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung*, in *Werke*, Marx; K. & Engels; F. Berlin, Dietz Verlag, Band 1, pp. 378-391.
- Meiksins Wood; E. (1995); *Democracy Against Capitalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.
- Moaddel; M. (1993); *Class, Politics and Ideology in the Iranian revolution*, New York, Columbia UP.  
(2005); *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism and Fundamentalism*, Chicago, Chicago UP.
- Moin; B. (1999); *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, London, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- Nedjati; Gh. R. (1992); *Twenty Five Years of Iranian Political History*, vols. i & ii, Tehran, Rasa Publishing, [in Persian].

Richard; Y. (2003); "Modern Iranian Political Thought", in *Modern Iran; Roots and Results of Revolution*, Keddie; N. R., New Haven, Yale UP, pp. 188-212 .

Riesebrodt; M. (1993); *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran*, transl. D. Reneau, Berkeley, California UP.

Sachedina; A. A. (1991); *Activist Shi'ism in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon*, in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, Marty; M. E. & Appleby; R. S. (ed.) Chicago, Chicago UP, pp. 403-456.

Sander; Å. & Andersson; D. (2015); *Religion och religiositet i en pluralistisk och föränderlig värld*, in *Det mångreligiösa Sverige: ett landskap i förändring*, Andersson; D. & Sander; Å. (red.) Lund, Studentlitteratur, pp. 37-138.

Sartre; J. P. (1988); *Existentialismen är en Humanism*, Stockholm, Askelin & Häggelund förlag.

### Articles:

Abrahamian; E. (March-April, 1991); 'Khomeini: Fundamentalist or Populist?', in *New Left Review*, vol. I/186, pp. 102-119.

Akhavi; Sh. (Nov., 1992); 'The Clergy's Concept of Rule in Egypt and Iran', in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 524, pp. 92-102.

Emerson; M. O. & Hartman; D. (2006); 'The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism', in *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 32, pp. 127-144.

Ganji; A. (1998); 'Religious State and State Religion', in *Kian*, vol. 41, pp. 18-29 [in Persian].

Losurdo; D. (2004); 'What is Fundamentalism?', in *Nature, Society and Thought*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 5-46.

Hamdan; A. (2005); 'Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements', in *International Education Journal*, 2005, vol. 6(1), pp. 42-64.

(2012); 'The Role of Authentic Islam: The Way Forward for Women in Saudi Arabia', in *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, vol. 10(3), pp. 200-220.

Ryan; P. J. (Dec., 1984); 'Islamic Fundamentalism: A Questionable Category', in *America*, pp. 437-440.

Saleh-Pour; J. (1995); 'The Process of Secularisation of Shi'i jurisprudence', in *Kian*, vol. 24, pp. 17-23 [in Persian].

Shalgooni; M. R. (June, 2002); 'Islam and Modernism vii: Ernest Gellner: A case of thinly veiled historic idealism', in *Iran Bulletin*, pp. 23-37.

### Albums:

Pink Floyd; (1979); *The Wall*.